

ART • WEEKEND

## A Trailblazing Lesbian Artist Gets Her Due

Harmony Hammond's work can appear bewildering at first, expansive in its diametrical explorations, and sprawling in its material juxtapositions.

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Harmony Hammond, "Inappropriate Longings" (1992), oil, acrylic, canvas, linoleum, latex rubber, metal gutter and water trough, dry leaves (triptych), 91 x 219 inches, courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; photo: Jeffrey Sturges

touch me and let me touch you  
for the personal is political  
language waivers with desire  
it is skin  
with which I caress the  
other

— Harmony Hammond, *Blood Journals*  
(1994)

RIDGEFIELD, Connecticut — Contested bodies take center stage in [\*Material Witness, Five Decades of Art\*](#), an audacious, and long overdue, museum survey of lesbian artist and activist, Harmony Hammond at the Aldrich

Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

An impressive medley of aesthetic strategies (rips, sutures, holes, fragments, patches, stitches, wrappings, knots) combined with a startling array of painterly, handmade and found materials (repurposed fabric, linoleum, metal, charred wood, grommets, burlap, natural straw, leaves, root, hair, blood, latex rubber) characterize the visual lexicon of this pioneering artist's work.

Hammond's work can appear bewildering at first, expansive in its diametrical explorations, and sprawling in its material juxtapositions. The exhibition, which takes place over four galleries, encompassing paintings, drawings, textiles, sculptures, and installations from the 1970s to the present day, eschews chronology – an astute choice by the curator, Amy Smith-Stewart. Polemical considerations and biographical detail, more than formal developments, explicate Hammond's multivalent practice, which straddles feminism, abstraction, and sexual politics.

Hammond was born in a lower middle-class suburb of Chicago in 1944 and studied art in Decatur, Illinois, before moving to Minneapolis with her husband, Stephen Clover, an artist who came out as gay within a year of their marriage. Hammond's early work was expressive and figurative, but she later adopted the hard-edged abstraction of Minimalism which, along with Pop and Conceptual Art, was in vogue in the 60s. Her male contemporaries, most notably Frank Stella and Carl Andre (whose influences can be felt in Hammond's work), rejected the expressive drives that had characterized Abstract Expressionism's "action painting" the decade prior, electing instead an industrial vocabulary of materials and processes that erased sentient corollaries of gesture and touch.



Harmony Hammond, "Little Suture" (2001–2002), oil and metal on canvas, 56.50 x 50 inches, Collection of Armando Espinosa Prieto and Craig Johnson, Santa Fe; photo: Eric Swanson

In the August following the Stonewall Riots in June '69, Hammond and Clover moved to New York. The city was a hotbed of political activity. The Civil Rights movement, coupled with the women's movement, antiwar protests, and the start of the Gay Liberation movement put New York on the cusp of a social and cultural revolution. Second-wave feminism was just around the corner. The couple separated, but Hammond was pregnant. She later gave birth to a daughter, Tanya.

In the first gallery, I am drawn to "Little Suture" (2001–2), an abstract painting with assemblage elements. It is bifurcated into oppositional color schemes — cadmium reds and greens, at once somber and saturated — with a found rectangular corrugated metal sheet running down its center.

The painting is uncannily corporeal, a coincidence of duality and oneness, denoting both flesh and spirit. The impasto surface, with its gentle, throbbing monochromes, evoke the pulsations of the body — the heartbeat, blood cells, and veins — while the undulating, rusted sheet of metal, resembling a rib cage and spinal cord, is marked with delicate streaks of red, redolent of both blood and an electrical charge.

For a few years in the early '70s, Hammond was part of a feminist consciousness raising group in New York. The group, which included the painter Louise Fishman, came to understand that women as a class were oppressed, and their work was not taken seriously. A wall text in the exhibition quotes Hammond: “For me the painting skin, that edge where art and life meet, always relates to the body as site.”



“Harmony Hammond, *Material Witness: Five Decades of Art*” at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, installation view, left clockwise: “Floorpiece V; IV; II; III; VI” (all 1973), courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; photo: Jason Mandella

By locating the body as a site, Hammond marshals the female body out of a state of passivity into the world of energy, and action. The conflation of consciousness and activism — her singular contribution to the expanded fields of post-minimalism and queer art — is at the heart of Hammond’s complex experiments with abstraction.

In the corridor leading from the first gallery to the second, on the museum’s ground floor, there is a series of smaller works completed between 1993 and 2005, done at various stages in the artist’s life. “Blood Journals (Giorno I–X)” (1994) is a riveting series of works on paper the artist made while at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center in Northern Italy. While there, she used her menstrual blood, along with watercolor, charcoal, ink, and stickers, to scrawl cryptic messages on paper. Menstrual blood, considered a taboo bodily fluid, had already been used by other feminist artists, including Carolee Schneemann and Judy Chicago, to situate the female body as a place of political agency.

One of the works read: “touch me and let me touch you/for the personal is political/language waivers with desire/it is skin/with which I caress the/other.” Barely legible, the lesbian voice, a specter of unspoken desires, is inscribed with

blood as a palimpsest on paper, a record of its being. The fourth wall has come down, the actor in the play has revealed herself: it's the most unmasked work in the show.

A sense of peril lurks just beneath the script, a sense that articulating these thoughts, feelings, gestures have the potential to provoke violence, from within and without. The script's intimation of same-sex intimacy as the harbinger of sexual politics transforms this work into a conceptual and moral fulcrum, upon which everything else that comes later delicately hinges.



Harmony Hammond, "Kong" (1981), cloth, wood, foam rubber, acrylic, gesso, glitter, Dorland's Wax Medium, charcoal powder, 41 x 74 x 26 inches, Everson Museum of Art, gift of Judith Daner

Touch, as a radical gesture, continues to resonate in Hammond's "wrapped sculptures" which are located sporadically throughout the exhibition. "Kong" (1981), the largest of these, is an aggrandized hand which, according to the wall text, belongs to "a spatial invader or interloper." Or, perhaps alternately, to a lesbian who, having lived in the closet for far too long, pries her way out to claim her power. If "Kong" represents a corpus of power, then an unfurling hand could be a convenient metaphor for "coming out" and such related

idiomatic expressions as "taking power back in one's hands."

Made of foam rubber, gesso, glitter, wax and charcoal powder, these wrapped wooden armatures, which have a fantastical quality to them, were conjured up by a line in Monique Wittig's 1973 novel *Le Corps Lesbien* (*The Lesbian Body*), in which she writes, "Cloth covered with latex suggests muscle and tissue." These "wrapped sculptures" convey a muscular grace, as if Minimalism itself got a camp makeover *par elegance*.

Hammond, who came out as a lesbian in 1973, was on the forefront of the feminist and lesbian art movement in New York in the early '70s. She was a founding member of A.I.R., the first women's cooperative gallery in the city, and of the journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication of Art and Politics*. She organized *A Lesbian Art Show*, the first of its kind, at 112 Greene Street Workshop in Soho in 1978, and her book, *Lesbian Art in America* (2000), is still the definitive tome on the subject. "It's not only about making our work," as Hammond [writes](#) in an Artsy post commemorating the 50th anniversary of Stonewall, "we also have to document and preserve it and insist on a place in history or it will be erased."



Harmony Hammond, "Floorpiece VI" (1973), acrylic on fabric, 65 inches diameter, courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; photo: Jeffrey Sturges

Feminist artists of the era, Hammond included, celebrated handicrafts from both the domestic space and non-Western cultures as a cultural antithesis to Western patriarchal art histories that positioned white men at the center of the narrative. Through consciousness-raising activities and particularly her practice of *t'ai chi ch'uan* and Aikido, martial arts originating in China and Japan, respectively, Hammond learned to claim space through mindful and precise bodily movements. In the second gallery, Hammond harnesses this spiritual knowledge and applies it to female labor with

"Floorpiece II-VI" (1973), a group of brightly colored mandala-like painted floor sculptures, braided from the inside out, that resemble household rugs.

Made the same year the artist came out, these works also reflect her personal gesture of cutting off her braided ponytail. The floor pieces' "braids," made of commercial knit fabric waste collected from dumpsters, became Hammond's idiom for a lesbian aesthetic. Hammond believed that the braids, when woven together and placed horizontally, reflect states of similitude and intimacy, making it a ripe lesbian metaphor for same-sex communal empathy and love; and one born out of a female consciousness.

"Presences" (1971-72), a group of six crudely made headless effigies adorned in painted and weathered rags, haunt the third gallery, on the second floor. The work, first shown at A.I.R. Gallery, has been restaged 46 years later (which speaks to the pitiful economy for women's art, even when it's this important, but that's a different topic).



"Harmony Hammond: Material Witness, Five Decades of Art" at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, installation view, Balcony Gallery: left foreground clockwise, "Presence III, VIII, VI, V" (1972); "Presence II" (1971); "Presence IV" (1972), courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York, © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; photo: Jason Mandella

Hung by coarse rope affixed to coat hangers, this "rag tag army of women occupying space," as Hammond describes them, feels more like a public execution site: I imagine a lynching scene of Salem witches. The use of coat hangers is also a particularly chilling reminder of the country's all-too-virulent abortion wars, in which the coat hanger has become a national symbol for dissent against regulating women's bodies.

In 1984, Hammond took a trip out to New Mexico, and like her forbears, Georgia O'Keefe and Agnes Martin, she never returned to city life. She settled out in Galisteo, commuting to teach in Tucson, Arizona, until she retired in 2006. The ruggedness of the land — its distinct cultural history and rural aesthetic — is evident in the later work on display in the last gallery, accentuating it with a sense of place, and oddly enough, a new sense of belonging.

To be a lesbian, writes Martha Gever, "means engaging in a complex, often treacherous, system of cultural identities, representations and institutions, and a history of sexual regulation" (quoted in Hammond's Introduction to *Lesbian Art in America*). Throughout her work, Hammond has generously extended the definition of the word "lesbian" to include all women on the social fringes, who have been downtrodden, forgotten, and marginalized.

"Chicken Lady" (1989), a large work made of corrugated roofing, a colorful embroidered quilt left behind by her close friend, the artist Ann Wilson, and a painted text from a letter she received from Marian Doherty, an A.I.R. intern (also reproduced in the gallery) is among the works that reinforce this claim, referring to a notational character in Hammond's universe of misfits on the peripheries of gender and social class, a fictional woman who lived along a riverside with her chickens.



Harmony Hammond, "Chicken Lady"  
 (1989), quilt, canvas, acrylic, oil paint,  
 corrugated roofing tin (3 panels), 96 x  
 127 ½ inches overall; courtesy of the  
 artist and Alexander Gray Associates,  
 New York, © 2018 Harmony Hammond /  
 Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights  
 Society (ARS), NY; photo: Eric Swanson

"Chicken Lady," along with "Inappropriate Longings" (1992), a large triptych hanging diagonally across from it, a metal bucket of leaves set down in front, are resolutely situated within a locale, rather than a state of consciousness. They reveal *genius loci*, a spirit of a place. Did Hammond finally locate a sense of belonging in the vast arid plains of the Southwest? It would appear so.

The last set of works in *Material Witness* are Hammond's most recent paintings.

Constructed in viscous paint with embedded grommets, straps, pushpins, laces, ropes, folds, flaps, seams, cloth strips, and patches of coarse burlap, these austere and monumental "near

monochromes" have the presence of hermetically sealed bodies that are synchronously wounded and healing.

With their symbolic orifices, blood, rips, cuts, smears, wounds, scabs, and bandages, they communicate simultaneous states of rapture and rupture, and a host of erotic and esoteric associations that relate to flesh and spirit. There's strength, but not without vulnerability. It's a full-fledged return to painting that stakes a claim for Hammond as a central protagonist in a Post-Minimalist discourse, a claim that is ruggedly feminist and heroically lesbian.

Harmony Hammond: Material Witness, Five Decades of Art continues at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Connecticut) through September 15. The exhibition is curated by Amy Smith-Stewart.